

Program History



Below is an excerpt from a speech delivered by Interior Secretary Norton December 5, 2003, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Keep America Beautiful.

... The entire concept of stewardship and volunteerism is part of our national ethos. It comes in many forms. After the September 11th tragedies, President Bush asked that each individual contribute two years over a lifetime to the service of others. We have been delighted by the outpouring of unselfish volunteerism by Americans all over the country.

As a part of the President's USA Freedom Corps effort, we at Interior chose to bring back [in April 2003] a wonderful volunteer program called Take Pride in America.

As you may know, the Take Pride in America program began back in 1985 with Interior Secretary Donald Hodel. During his confirmation hearing he told the Senate panel that he could not stop the American public from stealing artifacts and committing acts of vandalism on public lands, even with the resources of the U.S. Army and Marines.

The solution, he said, was to raise awareness among the public of the fact that abusers of public lands and public resources were robbing the American public of a shared birthright.

After his confirmation, Secretary Hodel developed Take Pride in America. He took the concept to the Ad Council and succeeded in gaining approval for a national campaign.

By February 1986, President Reagan's message to the Congress was that "All Americans should take pride in their outstanding public lands and historic sites that belong to everyone."

Take Prides' more famous ads came from three celebrity spokesmen: Charles Bronson, Clint Eastwood and Lou Gossett, Jr. The three tough guy actors delivered the message: "Bad guys abuse public land. Good guys save it."

We worked with Keep America Beautiful and by 1987 celebrated the first annual Take Pride in America/Keep America Beautiful Public Lands Day Awards.

By 1988, there were 1100 people gathered on the White House lawn for the Take Pride national awards. The top winners included three Keep America Beautiful system programs: Keep Mobile Beautiful from Alabama, Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful, Inc. in Georgia and Keep North Carolina Clean and Beautiful.

President Reagan said: "Perhaps best of all, there are people like you throughout the country, taking pride in America and protecting the abundant majesty of our nation. Throughout our history, caring individuals have bequeathed great parks, forests, wildlife preserves, and historic sites to a nation that they love and cherish. And the award winners we recognize today are their moral heirs and successors—individuals, working together and accomplishing great things. That's something America can truly be proud of."

I have been inspired by this tremendous volunteerism. More than 200,000 people already volunteer with the various bureaus of the Interior Department, and we could not do our jobs without them. ...